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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000595

SIPDIS

STATE FOR R, IIP-TERRY SCOTT AND PATRICIA ATKISSON, NEA/PPD-MACINNES AND DAVIES, NEA/ARP-KANESHIRO, INR/NESA, LONDON FOR KHOURY, PARIS FOR O'FRIEL

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SUBJECT: EVALUATION: KUWAIT SHARED VALUES SPEAKER HEDIEH MIRAHMADI

REF: KUWAIT 05391

¶1. Summary: Dr. Hedieh Mirahmadi, Director of Public Affairs for the Supreme Islamic Council of America and member of the Council of American Muslim Understanding, visited Kuwait 14-15 January in the context of the Department's Shared Values campaign. In a series of presentations before audiences that ranged from conservative Islamist charities to liberal NGOs, Dr. Mirahmadi, a Sunni Muslim, addressed the issue of Islam's international reputation as a religion of violence and intolerance, and the responsibility of Muslims to counter the extremist ideologies that give credence to this perception. The audience reaction to Dr. Mirahmadi's polite but straightforward presentations ranged from mannered toleration (on the part of one Muslim charity) to angry rhetorical outbursts in denunciation of US policy (on the part of university students and faculty.) Given the importance of her message and the tact with which she delivers it, we plan to bring this speaker back to Kuwait in the late spring for a more extensive program. Post recommends Dr. Mirahmadi to any post wishing to program on this sensitive subject. End Summary.

¶2. Dr. Hedieh Mirahmadi, Director of Public Affairs for the Supreme Islamic Council of America and member of the Council of American Muslim Understanding, visited Kuwait 14-15 January in the context of the Shared Values campaign. Dr. Mirahmadi was a last minute substitute for the subjects of the Shared Values video spots that we had managed to get broadcast on Kuwait TV during Ramadan, and post was accordingly disappointed when these locally-recognized speakers were not able to travel to Kuwait as planned. Added to our apprehension was the fact that Dr. Mirahmadi, a Californian of Iranian extraction, does not speak Arabic and was therefore limited in terms of the kinds of audiences she could engage. In retrospect, however, we think Dr. Mirahmadi's principal message (that extremist religious violence threatens Islam's future) was of great utility in the context of Kuwait's current internal debate on the growing Islamist influence in the country's civil institutions.

¶3. Programs with the leadership of the International Islamic Charitable Organization (IIOC) and two women's Islamic charities (including a program for thirty members of the Islamic Care Society) broke new ground for PAS. These meetings touched on the basic themes of tolerance and mutual respect that underpin the shared values initiative, and the audiences expressed deep interest in Muslim life in the US. When our speaker attempted to engage the IIOC leadership on a discussion of the issue of "jihad," however, they refused to be drawn out, instead repeating that moderation is a good thing and that there is "only one Islam." Our effort to move the conversation into the crux of the matter--are Muslim organizations like the IIOC willing to put politically loaded religious terms like "jihad" and "mushrakeen" into a modern context--clearly made them uncomfortable, and reinforced our sense that our polite reception was for diplomatic purposes only. This sense was reinforced somewhat by a photo spray in their lobby that showed dismembered Palestinian corpses, with the caption, "Thus is Jewish hatred rendered."

¶4. Dr. Mirahmadi's presentation before Kuwait University's Mass Communication Department, which includes a number of liberally oriented, US-educated staff among its ranks, was noteworthy for the highly charged political tone of the interaction. The audience was clearly not interested in hearing about Muslim life in America, and instead focused on a litany of accusations that US policy was biased against Muslims. One student proclaimed, to general approbation, that there was no proof Muslims carried out the September 11 attacks, and that US actions in Afghanistan effectively constituted a "Crusade." The department faculty joined in with a heated attack of the Shared Values program, warning that Arabs would not be fooled by such egregious propagandizing while martyrs are falling in Palestine. (Reftel addresses the issue of Kuwaiti reaction to the Shared Values campaign.)

¶5. Dr. Mirahmadi responded well to these charges,

effectively refusing to accept self-victimization and captious argumentation as excuses for extremist violence. To the charge that there was no proof Muslims were behind the September 11 attacks, she replied that the hijackers themselves made videotapes claiming responsibility for the attacks and declaring that they had done so in the name of Islam, and asked her interlocutor if he really believed what he was saying. Regarding the US "crusade" in Afghanistan, she reminded her audience that Afghans themselves were happy to see the Taliban go, and asked why anyone saw a reason to contradict them. When one angry student accused the US of discriminating against Muslims by adopting new visa requirements, Dr. Mirahmadi said that if Arab states apply harsh and onerous control mechanisms to other Arabs, why would anyone fault the US for tightening up a very lax immigration system after thousands of its citizens were killed?

16. Dr. Mirahmadi's visit received wide coverage in Kuwait's major Arabic-language dailies and major English-language daily. She was interviewed live on KTV's "Good Morning Kuwait." Reportage was positive, focusing on themes of moderate Islam and the freedom and tolerance accorded Muslims in the U.S. Sample headlines include:

"`Immigration laws old. enforced after 9/11'"

"There is Definitely a Future for Islam in America"

"`Muslims sometimes disagree amongst themselves and are intolerant of each other'"

"Dr. Mirahmadi: `It is very sad that terrorism is the introduction so many have to our religion'"

"`We have to portray the true image of Islam as a model for tolerance and forgiveness'"

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17. Program Evaluation: Post greatly appreciates the work of IIP in bringing Dr. Mirahamdi to Kuwait. IIP/G/MEA-SA Terrence Scott and IIP/T/SV Patricia Attkisson (who came to Kuwait with this speaker) provided superb guidance and support on this program. > Dr. Mirahmadi's credibility as a US Muslim leader, her personable manner and > professional background (a former corporate litigator who doesn't fluster easily) were ideally suited to the issue at hand. We look forward to bringing her back to Kuwait during the May/June timeframe.

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